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Mission Impossible? Making a Political Science Final Exam That's Fun to Grade

John L. Seitz, *Wofford College*

About ten years ago, before he died, a colleague of mine from the philosophy department made a curious statement about final exams. (Walt made many curious statements, but this one I especially remember.) He said that he enjoyed correcting his students' final examinations because he found them fun to read. He would make up questions that didn't call for the recital of factual material, but rather called upon his students to display original thinking on some philo-

sophical topic. Walt said he was never sure what the students would come up with in their answers. I remember thinking at the time that such an exercise would be very hard to do in my field and impossible to grade.

It is ten years later, and I have just finished grading about 40 final examinations from my two "Introduction to Political Science" classes. As I was grading the overview question, the one that is supposed to integrate the whole semes-

ter's work, I realized that I had made a question that was somewhat like Walt's.

The dean's instructions are that final examinations should cover the semester's work. I always found that hard to do in my introductory courses where large amounts of information are presented on a wide range of topics. I struggled with that instruction until, a few years ago, I came up with an idea for a question that should satisfy the dean. It is a reasonable ques-

tion, one which the students should be able to handle. And not unimportant, it is a question that I can grade.

The question reads as follows: "Select a major problem facing the world today and show how the human polity could attack it. In the discussion of your political strategy for attacking the problem cover the following: where your strategy falls on the spectrum of political ideologies; the effect the strategy will probably have on the economy; how your strategy fits into the American political culture; how the media can be used to promote the strategy; the role individuals, political leaders, political parties, and interest groups will have in your strategy; and the role laws will have." I hand out the question near the beginning of the course so my students can think about it during the semester. The question is given on the final examination and counts for one-third of the exam's grade.

As I graded the question this year, I suddenly realized that I was looking forward to reading what my students had to say. And I also realized that the question was relatively easy to grade; each of the different topics in the question was covered during the semester. I warn students when I give them the question that they have time to prepare really good answers, answers that reflect that they understand well the problem they are discussing and that they have learned

something of importance under each of the topics we cover during the semester. For example, many of my students pick an environmental issue because I often use such issues to illustrate points during the course. If they select ozone depletion as their issue and get it confused with global warming, I am not pleased. If they give lots of good ways the media can be used to publicize their strategy, but do not show that they understand that the media is a business and purchasing media time is expensive, I scowl.

I use Kay Lawson's *The Human Polity: A Comparative Introduction to Political Science* as our basic text in this course. Lawson's principal thesis is that the peoples of the world have now become so interdependent that they represent one polity. She ends the book with a nice chapter on "change"—how change is inevitable, but it's uncertain whether the change will be beneficial or harmful. She calls on the students who use her text to work for change that will reduce human suffering, rather than increase it.

In thinking of ways human problems can be attacked, some of the students come up with novel strategies. The question combats the apathy that is common today in undergraduates and also the feeling that global problems are not solvable. I don't expect them, of course, to come up with ways to

solve these problems, but I do expect them to come up with practical ways to *attack* the problems.

Not all students do well on the question. It is not hard to discover those who have not thought about the question until the day before the exam or who don't understand the material in the course well enough to use it as they analyze a new political situation. Concepts such as ideology and political culture often present a challenge to introductory students when they try to use them in their own attempts at problem solving in the political world.

Part of my final examination in my introductory course still attempts to judge how well students are mastering the large amount of new factual information presented in the course. But the overview question generally does what it is designed to do and, surprisingly, makes for decent reading.

If Walt's spirit roams the halls of the building in which I have my office, it probably smiles as it contemplates a political scientist who has finally learned something from a philosophy teacher.

About the Author

John L. Seitz is professor of government at Wofford College. His book, *Global Issues: An Introduction*, was published by Blackwell Publishers in 1995.